



From: BOB FINSTHWAIT

June 15, 1980

Fellow Forty-fiver -

Everyone I've talked to since our reunion has expressed the feeling that our 35th was the best, most gemütlich one we've yet enjoyed. The young seemed to have had a great time, too!

Congratulations to the reunion committee for a well run show, with special thanks to Polly and Charley Gadsden and George Starkweather!

The highlight of the weekend was Gene Reilly's poetic dissertation, a powerful moment for the memory book!

Gene has thoughtfully offered not only to make it available to all who were in attendance, but to distribute it as well.

Here it is then, with our grateful thanks to Gene.

Best regards!

Bob

Strangers Once ... 1945-1980

35th Class Reunion
Amherst, May 31, 1980

"Strangers once, we came to dwell together"

Once I loved singing those words, but only now do I find myself listening to them.

Truly listening to them. Really hearing them in a way that begets understanding.

That's how it was though, wasn't it? Thirty-nine autumns before the next.

And here, tonight, in this place ... for just an evening, we "dwell together" again.

Because we want to. No questions. Out of instincts learned, each for reasons he best understands, has wished himself to return.

But no longer is the returning quite as strangers one to the other.

It's more than that after thirty-five years.

That's the softer dimension of this evening. Here.

"Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be

The last of life for which the first was made".

Browning's way of saying it.

The "last of life". The other part.

The one still to come. This part, in many ways, if you think about it.

"Youth shows but half", Browning said,

"Trust God, see all, nor be afraid."

I want to believe him. I want not to be afraid.

But sometimes I am anyway.

I fear for a world which consumes itself as old values become non-values.

And I am asked to accept new rules with each new event.

I fear for family in an age when having and begetting are trivialized by some as needlessly self-sacrificial. Some would say amoral.

I fear for my personal self as daily I better understand how deep runs my own pride.

I fear my own fallibility as each day declares itself to me more earnestly, and yet, each day too, more is asked of me in the way of sensitive judgment. And acceptance.

"The last of life for which the first was made"

It's the vulnerable half.

At least for me anyway.

When we were young it was easier to hope.

Growing old was what someone else did.

Older people mostly ... gentle, elder relatives not always well-known;

And retired soldiers.

I would have better things to do.

But of course, that wasn't so.

That wasn't so at all.

Growing older is the now for me. For us.

Help me, I sometimes say, to achieve it (to master the event)
With grace.

Others have.

(My pride again: by God, it would be nice to be classy about it!)

A part of me, component of the whole

Not incidental, closer to the soul.

The shaping tool, the weather and the tree

Experience here. How much it made me, me.

Growing happened here, but likely I was too arrogant to know it then ...
more critically, to appreciate it in the happening.

"The last of life" invites the perspective we shut out earlier.

As others have said before me, now I see.

Imperfectly, certainly. But thirty-five years afterward, now I see
at least some of it.

Thirty-nine years ago, self-consciously and from a distant outside,
looking in ... into Tommy Walsh's windows. Finally going in ...
the birthday money from Aunt Gertrude which would become my first
handmade jacket.

Touching the bolts of tweed, the Irish woolens, being attended to!
Was it Lloyd or Tommy?

The rush one felt at making the selection, at the thought of owning
and wearing something so splendid!

One's own. Success. Achievement. Manhood.

Growing older had begun then. And had I even noticed it?

The classroom in Walker where for the first time you met Synge and
O'Casey.

I mean met them, so as to hear them and to give your mind over to them.

Because F. Curtis Canfield provided you with the introduction.

Because F. Curtis Canfield had met and understood and loved them long
before

And decided it would be a gift you would share with him.

And in The Abbey there in Dublin, thirty-five years after, with your
own family, you would find a way to give perpetuity to the gift.

Of F. Curtis Canfield.

"Let me introduce you as I once was. It was when I was at Amherst just
after the war. There was this professor of drama who knew and loved
the Irish theatre."

Then, of course, it was instruction.

Only later would it become gift ... beginnings of a love of learning
... beginnings of wisdom.

Yes, I think so. A kind of wisdom began then.

And I could share that, as here, in this place, it had been shared
with me.

This place.

I have thought about these things before and I have written about them.

They come back at once, on command, as on the giving of a signal. Pigeons to the handful of grain.

Fragrances ... of the latex, glue, and wooden flats as Charlie Rogers, on hands and knees, built Volpone's city on the floor behind Kirby's stage.

Of Mitch's frankfurters which would be breakfast, his wagon as always drawn to the curb at Walker.

Of a sweet and nearly tactile chocolate and vanilla essence which greeted the visitor upon his opening of the door to Sarris's place.

Of decades of linseed oil rubbed into the stair treads at North and South.

Of old vellum and re-glued bindings, shelf upon shelf of them, in the Converse stacks on a rainy day.

Of grassy places, of old stonework, of seasons changing.

There are feelings too.

Like pride in your first Student story with a by-line.

A successful set shot (could it have been as long as fifteen feet or did you imagine that?) against Deerfield as a freshman.

The wonder, the astonishment ... at watching a punt sail nearly eighty yards in the Williams game, 1942.

The shock, the hurt, at a remarkably low grade

On a paper written carefully, joyfully, long into the night before.

But--you were told--your reasoning was less than scientific ... couldn't you see that?

The scholar would have. You had not.

Your reasoning had become non-reasoning when your heart had called up the arguments.

So your arguments were inept. Of little value.

Oh, how hard that was to accept.

And yet, how correct.

Learning happened then.

And to fragrances and feelings, add sounds and sights.

And people.

And both the happy and the bitter little morals to the story.

Growing older started then. And happened then.

A part of me, component of the whole

Not incidental, closer to the soul.

The shaping tool, the weather and the tree.

The Amherst time. How much it made me, me.

For this, for all of this, we should salute each other now.

Having shared this, having come this distance together.

Is it arrogant of me to say we've earned it?

I think not.

Truly this shared thing is ours.

Tonight. In this place, we may savor it.

Strangers once, perhaps. Sons of our fathers.
Friends now.

To us, then, friends. To us.

- Gene Reilly, 1945